

The Life and Legend of Leadbelly
by Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell
Harper Collins \$25
reviewed by Peter Brown

Huddie Ledbetter known as Leadbelly, (originally spelled Lead Belly) was one of the greatest and most fascinating musicians America has produced. He claimed to pick a 100 bales of cotton a day, called himself "The King of the 12-String Guitar," and his music was an incredible amalgam of blues, folk songs, field hollers, religious songs and pop songs of the day. His life was the stuff of legend, singing his way out of prison by writing a pardon plea to the Governor of Texas, and it's astounding that it's taken till now -- more than 40 years after his death -- for an accurate book on his life to appear.

There have been others, most notably *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* by John A. and Alan Lomax (published by MacMillan in 1936) and much later *The Midnight Special* by Dick Garvin and Ed Addeo in 1971. The failed and difficult to find movie *Leadbelly* directed by Gordon Parks was unfortunately based on the latter. Other than that, for information on Leadbelly, one had to read articles in magazines such as *Sing Out!* which published a brilliant article "A Great Long Time" by musicologist Frederic Ramsey Jr in 1965, and read reminiscences by Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie and other singers on album covers and in song books.

Leadbelly was born in January of 1888 either in Louisiana or Texas. He grew up in the Caddo Lake region of Louisiana where Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas converge about 15 miles northwest of Shreveport, La. Leadbelly's parents were fairly well off for share-cropping cotton farmers. By the time he was a teenager, his parents were landowners, and Leadbelly, a top student in school was well-educated. An only child, he later had a half-sister (which the book never fully explains), his parents went out of their way to make him feel special, showering him with gifts (such as a horse) they could not afford. Even at an early age, he made his unforgettable presence felt, and showed a talent for music, first on piano, accordion and organ (he played in his church) and later on guitar. He also developed an early fondness for women, a fondness when challenged that brought out a violent streak, putting him in trouble with the law while still in his teens. At first his father, Wes Ledbetter, a hard working man of considerable reputation was able to extract his son from these difficulties. Later on, it wasn't so easy.

Leadbelly left home while still in his teens, first for Shreveport, an extremely wild place by all accounts including Leadbelly's. His song "Fannin Street," about the town's red light district remains a classic. He married and moved on to Dallas where he hooked up with the great blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson, playing on the streets, in bars and at parties. Though Leadbelly was the older and more experienced of the two, he always credited Jefferson as his teacher.

Leadbelly left Dallas returning to the area where he grew up in East Texas and almost immediately got into trouble with the law over a woman. His parents sold their farm to pay his legal fees, but Leadbelly ended up on the chain gang anyway. He escaped, changed his name to Walter Boyd, fled to New Orleans and later to Bowie County in Northeastern Texas.

It was there under mysterious circumstances that Leadbelly was accused of murdering his best friend and after two trials received a sentence of 30 years at the Shaw Prison Farm. He escaped almost immediately, was quickly

caught and it didn't take long before he realized his survival depended on his doing "good time". Leadbelly stayed at Shaw for two years and then was transferred to the Central State Prison Farm, better known as Sugarland. It was there four years later that Leadbelly sung himself out of prison by writing a song to Texas Governor Pat Neff, who kept Leadbelly there another year (so he could play for him when he visited) then pardoned him just before leaving office.

Leadbelly stayed in Texas awhile, eventually returning to Shreveport, where five years later he was convicted of assault to kill (on a white man no less) and sentenced to ten years at Angola, one of the most notorious penitentiaries in the country.

In 1933 Leadbelly's luck and life would change when he was "discovered" by folklorist John A. Lomax who was collecting and making field recordings of folk and prison songs for the Library of Congress. In Leadbelly, Lomax found an amazing repository of songs, and Leadbelly sensing opportunity quickly wrote a song to Louisiana Governor O.K. Allen, asking for a pardon and recorded it so Lomax could play it for him. This is one of the places where the book clears up the "Leadbelly myth," for as fate would have it, Leadbelly was released the following year for good behavior.

Leadbelly first went to Dallas to stay with his daughter, then back to Shreveport to live with Martha Thomas who later married him, all the while staying in touch with Lomax by mail, asking for employment as his driver and servant. Finally, with reservations Lomax granted his request, which considering Leadbelly's history was an extremely brave and also quite crazy for a white Texan to do. At first they continued to tour Southern Prison Farms which Leadbelly wasn't too happy about, often being forced to sleep and eat with the convicts. He was however of great use to Lomax, since he was often able to convince the prisoners to sing for Lomax. Eventually Lomax took Leadbelly North, presenting him to folklore societies and other intellectual gatherings first in Washington, then Philadelphia and New York before the Texas-Exes, an alumni organization of the University of Texas. Lomax was not prepared for what happened in New York. The press got a hold of the story of the ex-murderer Southern convict and exploded it across the headlines. Suddenly Leadbelly was famous. In retrospect, one could say that Lomax didn't have a clue as to what he had on his hands. Though it's obvious he truly loved the music, he also viewed it in the most intellectual terms and tried to restrict Leadbelly to performing only the traditional ballads and blues, no pop songs. At first he made Leadbelly perform wearing his convict stripes.

Lomax obtained a recording contract for Leadbelly with the American Recording Company (now available on Columbia) and started writing a book, with his son Alan, who had joined them *Negro Folk Songs As Sung By Lead Belly*. Lomax also shrewdly attached his and Alan's names to the copyrights of Leadbelly's songs.

The heat was on and Lomax with his son and Leadbelly retreated to a house in Connecticut leant to them by a friend so he could finish his book. They were joined there by Martha Promise who soon after married Leadbelly and the couple worked for the Lomaxes as servants. Leadbelly began recording for American, and also at home for the Lomaxes who recorded everything he knew (now available as the *Library of Congress Recordings* available on Rounder). It was during this time that Leadbelly realized the white Northerners listening to him had no idea what he was singing about, and he started making up spoken introductions to his songs. In about a

month, he had introductions for the hundreds of songs he knew. Alan Lomax said it was one of the most remarkable things Leadbelly did.

Leadbelly and the senior Lomax eventually split after a disastrous, often scary for Lomax, tour of Northern Colleges. Leadbelly wanted to be an entertainer and Lomax wanted him to be a folk singer, an artifact of culture. Lomax went back to Texas and Leadbelly and Martha to Louisiana. Leadbelly and Martha returned to New York in 1936, where he would live in apartment on the Lower East Side for the rest of his life.

Leadbelly recorded for various labels under contracts usually arranged by Alan Lomax who remained his friend. He was taken in by a collective of young folksingers known as the Almanac Singers which included Pete Seeger, Lee Hays and Woody Guthrie. They were left-wingers and Communists and Leadbelly became a hero of the Communist Party which saw him as an authentic genuine folk hero. It is doubtful that Leadbelly ever cared about Communist ideals (though it landed him in the F.B.I. files), but these were the only people who would give him work. Leadbelly's records never sold in his lifetime and maybe \$200 was the most he ever saw for a performance. Eventually he recorded for Moses Asch who later started Folkways records. Asch hardly paid him anything, but was always happy to record him.

Leadbelly would occasionally tour outside of New York, often to Texas, once to Paris, and even stayed in Hollywood for a bit (where he recorded for Capitol) and tried to get in movies. But mostly, he stayed in New York where he'd jam and record with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston, Pete Seeger and other musicians. For a while he had his own radio show, and discovered a new talent, performing for children.

In the spring of 1949, Leadbelly suddenly had difficulty walking on stage for a concert in Paris. The diagnosis was amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's Disease). Leadbelly died in December of that year, and a year later his song "Irene Goodnight," would be a number one pop hit for the Weavers. As Pete Seeger has often said, "If he had only lived another year, all his dreams would have come true."

Authors Wolfe and Lornell have done an incredible job of research, tracking down Leadbelly's surviving relatives and backing up information wherever possible. They clear up earlier misconceptions and vastly improve upon Lomax's 1934 book, which insisted on quoting Leadbelly in dialect. They also provide more than a glimpse as to what kind of man Leadbelly was -- beyond the murdering convict.

Such details, as how he would talk for hours only in rhyme, preceding today's rappers by at least 40 years make him come alive. Most touching is the final account by the Weaver's Fred Hellerman of a typical Sunday night jam at Leadbelly's East Side six-floor walk-up. Late at night, Leadbelly would finally get out of his guitar and start to play, and suddenly sleepy little kids from all over the building would wander into the apartment. Then he began entertaining.